



April 25, 2025

Good morning, Chair Roegner, Vice-Chair Timken, and Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Ohio Senate Higher Education Committee, my name is Megan Wood and I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director and CEO of the Ohio History Connection. I am here today to offer testimony on House Bill 96 and in particular the line items that involve the Ohio History Connection and our work throughout the state.

For background, the Ohio History Connection as the State of Ohio's history partner with the mission to spark discovery of Ohio's stories, to embrace the present, share the past and transform the future. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization chartered in 1885, the Ohio History Connection carries out history services for Ohio and its citizens focused on preserving and sharing the state's history. This includes housing the State Historic Preservation Office, and managing one of the largest historic site systems in the country with 58 sites.

Since I last spoke to you and your Ohio Senate colleagues two years ago regarding the state's main operating budget— I was almost brand new as CEO — the Ohio History Connection has accomplished several projects of generational significance for Ohio history:

We secured Ohio's first UNESCO World Heritage Site—the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks—putting them on the same international status as Macchu Pichu, the Pyramids of Giza and Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. We partnered with the National Park Service to honor the collection of eight Ohio Native American earthwork sites with the prestige of World Heritage - three Ohio History Connection sites: the Great Circle and Octagon Earthworks in Newark, Fort Ancient in Warren County, and five locations of the Hopewell Culture National Historical Park in Chillicothe. Since being inscribed on the World Heritage List, we have seen attendance at these sites increase four-fold, helping to drive tourism and economic development.

We completed and opened a state-of-the-art Collections Care Center on our main campus; this will allow us to properly pass on to future generations of Ohioans the significant objects pertaining to Ohio history in our care.

The Ohio History Connection took an active role in the creation of Ohio's newest addition to our state park network, the Great Council State Park by partnering with ODNR on the creation of really beautiful and compelling exhibits. They really sparkle! I encourage each of you to go there and have your own look at them. I think you will be proud of them, as Ohioans, as we are.

In Cincinnati, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House — named for the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin—has been magnificently restored and reopened.

Important projects are in the pipeline to come on-line soon. These include a new Ohio River Museum at Marietta and Poindexter Village African American Museum in Columbus and important work at Ohio's only Revolutionary War era fort, Fort Laurens in Bolivar. The Octagon, a key part of the system of earthworks in Newark, is now open to the public on a daily basis. Many other projects have been completed at our sites across the state. The work being done by OHC is something that every Ohioan can be proud of. It has been our aim to make each one a shining reflection of its host community and all of Ohio.

In addition to all this we continue to do the everyday work of history. Every year we greet over 350,000 guests: Almost countless school groups visit our historic sites and we serve thousands of researchers. We provide opportunities to our 7,000+ members to learn more and enjoy Ohio's great heritage.

As it relates to the budget proposal you see before you today, I will touch on a few highlights and will certainly be more than happy to discuss any line item further should you have questions. There are lines within our budget that are pass-throughs to partner organizations that do not contribute to our operating budget, but do contribute to the amazing ecosystem of Ohio history in our beautiful state. Before giving insight on our proposed budget, I'd like to provide a few words about their missions and their importance.

360400 is the Holocaust and Genocide Memorial and Education Commission. Representatives for the Commission will testify on its specific impact and plans. Their relatively small staff are doing an amazing job reaching educators and students with their message.

360401 is the Ohio Commission for the U.S. Semiquincentennial or American 250-OH. Todd Kleismit, its Executive Director, will testify on behalf of the commission. This next biannual budget is the American 250 budget, the anniversary falling across both fiscal years. I am proud to serve on this commission, and that I live in a state that is showing such strong support of history.

360506 is the Hayes Presidential Center, which is a part of our historic site network, but operates very independently with strong leadership in its Executive Director Christie Weininger and its board. The site is thriving and sees over 30,000 visitors a year, half of whom visit from out of state and are spending their dollars in Ohio.

360508, the State Historical Grants line, provides \$350,000 per year for the Cincinnati Museum Center and the Western Reserve Historical Society. We endorse the ongoing operating support of two of our strongest and widest reaching history organizations. Cincinnati Museum Center has roots dating back to 1831 and serves over 300,000 people annually. They are our regional partner for National History Day in Ohio, a student program serving grades 6-12 doing historical research projects. Speaking of which, Cleveland is the birthplace of National History Day and the Western Reserve Historical Society serves as our partner in the program in northeast Ohio. Founded in 1867, Western Reserve serves over 180,000 people annually at seven sites and 39 historic properties. I am proud to be colleagues with Elizabeth Pierce and Kelly Falcone-Hall. All three of us worked up through our organizations to be the Executive Directors and we all three serve as proud American 250-OH commissioners.

The remaining items make up the state's portion of our annual operating budget. I would like to focus on the line items with the most significant increases and what drives the need for that increased investment.

The Ohio Revised Code, charges us to maintain and preserve a historic site system throughout the state. Currently, there are 58 sites that we manage on behalf of the State of Ohio. 360502 is the line item that provides the money to care for these sites and to keep them open to the public. This is a really big task. As a not-for-profit organization we are only able to do so with the funds provided biannually by the General Assembly in this line item. It is of critical importance. Candidly, this line item has not been adequately funded for many, many years at a level equal to the scope of Ohio's historic site system. The Governor proposed an increase to \$11.72 million in FY 26 and FY 27. This level would get us a good deal closer to the true funding level needed to make these sites flourish in so many Ohio communities. However, the House proposed \$8.25 million in FY 26 and FY 27. We are respectfully requesting that the Senate support the Governor's proposed funding level of \$11.72 million in each fiscal year.

In many instances our sites are locally managed and so many of our partners, often themselves not-for-profits, have been trying to run these facilities on shoe strings that are inadequate by any measure. Ohio's system can thrive but, frankly, only if the State of Ohio will invest in it at a level commensurate with the huge needs of so large a set of properties. There are dozens of sites—and many are in small or rural communities—that need more staffing and maintenance. This past summer our staff worked with each of the sites we are charged with operating—some operated by our staff but most operated by local managing partners—and together we determined the real amount of funding needed to pay for adequate staff—with realistic salary and benefits—and improved maintenance. These are the basic ingredients needed to fashion meaningful visitor experiences. That total was \$15.5 million across the 58 sites.

We understand that this level of funding may not be possible at this time—although we will continue to advocate for it. But an increase to \$11.72 million will create a new watermark for our site system. The Governor's recommended level would do a lot of good. I want to be clear about that. However, it will cause us to make difficult decisions as to how many sites we can realistically directly manage and which to prioritize. As the state's history partner, we do our best to be great stewards of the taxpayer funds we receive and continuously examine how best we can operate.

Back in 2022 we examined how we operate as a system, how do we best provide support to a variety of sites and partnering organizations that are geographically diverse. I'd like to share two quotes from that study:

"I can tell from working with these people that they are stretched to take care of everything, so knowing that and that OHC has limited resources, it would be as important to me as an increase in our site stipend to see additional personnel who could work across the state to help handle more maintenance issues in a timely manner."

“If we could change anything, it would be a larger stipend to cover the salaries of 2 maintenance/janitorial positions...With the increase, our site staff would be able to handle all everyday maintenance.”

Related to our Historic Sites line item is the extraordinary Capital Budget passed by the previous General Assembly. During that budget process, OHC was awarded over \$63 million in funding which is over 300% more than we have traditionally received. We are truly appreciative for this investment in so many Ohio historic sites and their host communities. This capital money is truly transformational for our organization and for Ohio history. We have big plans for this money at sites throughout Ohio. The operational funding level of \$11.72—the Governor’s proposed level—for our site system will not only help turn these transformational capital funds into functioning, vibrant assets for our state but will build pride in Ohio and its remarkable history. We aim, with your help and support, to ensure our historic sites are something that all Ohioans can be proud of particularly residents of communities that host these important historic places. We need your help, your support to achieve this.

The next line item I’d like to talk over with you today is the line item to capitalize on Ohio’s new UNESCO World Heritage Sites designation, called inscription. In September 2023, the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks were added to the list of World Heritage Sites, making it the first in Ohio and only the 25th (at the time) in the United States. As Governor DeWine stated in his inaugural address in 2023, “this is a big deal!” And we certainly agree with that. Since their inscription, we have seen major increases in visitation to the two Newark locations, the Octagon—again now open to the public—and the Great Circle and to Fort Ancient in Warren County. Since World Heritage inscription, in fact, we have seen nearly four times the attendance at these sites.

The Governor and the House are proposing \$3.2 million in FY 26 and \$2.6 million in FY 27 which, in addition to recently received Capital Funding, would allow us to continue to build up these sites making them into beacons for international visitation. Lots of people are going to want to see and experience these sites now and with adequate maintenance and staffing so we can demonstrate to Ohioans, Americans, and the world that globally significant history, history that extends thousands of years, is right here around us and we intend to preserve, share, and educate about that history for generations to come. Ohio has been the heart of it all for two thousand years.

The funding for our site system, as well as the UNESCO World Heritage line item, is investment in our Ohio communities, support Ohio jobs, saving Ohio history, and bring tourism dollars to Ohio communities.

The final item of note—line item 360504—supports Ohio’s official State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), which was established under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The State of Ohio has formally delegated its responsibilities under this Act to the Ohio History Connection. The funding proposed by the Governor and the House reflects the state’s required matching contribution to our federal allocation—a 60/40 match—with state funds covering 40% of SHPO’s total budget. Notably, this marks the first time the State of Ohio has met the federal

match percentage exactly as required by the National Park Service, ensuring full leverage of available federal preservation dollars.

The SHPO serves all Ohioans—across all 88 counties—as a critical connector between local communities, state and federal agencies, and the private sector in the shared mission to protect Ohio’s irreplaceable historic and cultural resources. In doing so, SHPO also acts as a catalyst for economic development, job creation, and community revitalization.

In partnership with the Ohio Department of Development, SHPO administers the Ohio Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program, which incentivizes private investment in the rehabilitation of historic properties through targeted tax credits. To date, the program has supported the successful rehabilitation of more than 975 historic buildings across 91 communities. These projects are projected to leverage over \$10.7 billion in combined private investment and federal tax incentives—preserving Ohio’s architectural legacy while generating substantial economic returns.

Beyond the tax credit program, SHPO offers a broad range of services and programs to support historic preservation across the state, including:

- Assisting property owners with nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.
- Documenting and evaluating historic resources through the Ohio Historic Inventory and Ohio Archaeological Inventory
- Advising state and federal agencies on the impact of infrastructure projects on historic and cultural sites.
- Administering the Certified Local Government (CLG) program, providing matching grants to support preservation at the local level.
- Managing the Ohio History Fund, a competitive grant program supporting interpretation, education, and bricks-and-mortar preservation projects.
- Coordinating Ohio Open Doors, a biennial, statewide initiative celebrating historic places and their stories.
- Overseeing Ohio’s participation in the federal Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grant Program, which supports the revitalization of historic properties in rural communities.
- Delivering the Building Doctor program, which offers expert, hands-on advice to property owners on maintaining historic structures.
- Recognizing excellence in preservation through annual awards for Public Education & Awareness and Preservation Merit.

Together, these programs reflect SHPO's enduring commitment to preserving Ohio's diverse historic legacy while strengthening the social, cultural, and economic fabric of communities across the state.

There is one line item that I want to reference that does not appear in the House-Passed Budget. Line Item 360509 supports our Outreach Department and the work that it does surrounding our online textbook *Ohio as America*. This publication is used to assist our schools as they teach Ohio History to fourth graders. *Ohio as America* is currently being utilized by over 20,000 fourth graders throughout the state. The Governor proposed a significant increase to \$1.96 million in FY 26 and \$1.96 million in FY 27 as this is reflective in the requested change to move teaching of Ohio History to ensure that Ohio History is taught adequately to all 122,000 4th grade student throughout Ohio, free of charge. The House removed this provision completely. We would respectfully request that the Senate brings back 360509 and fund it at a level of \$200,000. These funds would support staffing for the Historical Marker Program and for our work with local history organizations.

Our other budget line items are 360501 for Education and Collections that funds are ability to preserve and care for our collection, our archives, and provide the needed services of our State Archives. 350505 funds the operations of the National Afro American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce.

As I conclude my testimony, I want to thank each of you for your time and attention to the proposed budget for the Ohio History Connection. We sincerely appreciate the proposed increase in funding and know that our work is only beginning in making Ohio's site system economically sustainable and the best in the country. Thank you too for ensuring our state's archives and collections are accessible and properly cared for future generations. We are greatly appreciative of the proposed increase in funding for our respective line items from the Governor and the House and request that this funding level remain the same, and revert to the Governor's proposed budget for our site system and our education and outreach department.

Thank you, Chair Roegner, for the opportunity to address the Ohio Senate Higher Education Committee. I look forward to any questions you or members of the committee may have.